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ABSTRACT

The traditional role of the school librarian encompassed collection development, reading guidance and literature promotion, and reference. Over time these functions have expanded and participation in carrying out functions has become more active. For instance, the teaching role of the library media specialist is a dramatic and far-reaching extension of the traditional function of reference and information services. Another trend is a disparity in perceptions of the role of library media specialists between members of the profession and others, as well as between the professional literature and actual practice. New technologies, the information explosion, and recent emphasis on lifetime learning are contributing to the importance of modern school media specialists in education, and a definable role is emerging that is responsive to a changing world even though it is based on traditional functions. This role includes: (1) collection management based on a unified media concept; (2) promotion of literacy and guidance in the use of media; (3) teaching information skills for an information society; (4) acting as a change agent in the schools through awareness of new technology and consultation on curriculum and instructional design; and (5) assuming information management responsibilities beyond the walls of the centralized library media facility. Nineteen references are listed. (MES)

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CHANGING ROLES OF THE MEDIA SPECIALIST

Introduction

It has been said that there are no constants, only constant change. This maxim is certainly true for the role of the school library media specialist. Today, the increasing reliance on technology in education and the "information explosion" both point to a central, leadership role for an "information and systems" professional--namely, the school media specialist.

This role represents an expansion of traditional ones, as well as an extension into new areas. Periodically during the last three and a half decades, a similar pattern has been observed in the changing roles of the school media professional, as the scope of traditional responsibilities broadens and new responsibilities emerge. This digest examines (1) the traditional roles of the school library media specialist, (2) the evolution of those traditional roles and their development in new areas, and (3) expectations for future growth.

Literature on Roles of the Media Specialist

The literature in the school library media area is rich in discussions, papers, and articles that delve into the functions and responsibilities of school media specialists. Recent efforts include Ely (1982), Hortin (1985), Craver (1986), and Mancall, Aaron, and Walker (1986). One can look also at definitions and descriptions in texts on school library programs (e.g., Prostano and Prostano, 1982; Davies, 1979; Chisholm and Ely, 1976; Shapiro, 1975) or in the national standards (American Association of School Librarians, 1960, 1969, 1975).

Craver (1986), in particular, provides an excellent survey of the changing instructional role of the school media specialist by reviewing historical information provided in journal articles, standards, research studies, and monographs. Also worth special attention is the Fall 1986 issue of *School Library Media Quarterly*, which is devoted to the topic of the role library media program development plays in "educating students to think." The Mancall, Aaron, and Walker (1986) position paper is the cornerstone of the issue.

This digest does not attempt to cover the same ground as these fine resources. The intent here is to provide a composite view of the changing role of the media specialist and highlight major themes and trends.

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Traditional Roles

From early on, the role of the school librarian has been seen as encompassing three major areas:

(1) collection management,
(2) reading guidance and the promotion of literature, and
(3) reference and information service.

The foundation of the role of the school media specialist is the traditional library responsibilities of **collection development and management**. These responsibilities include collection building, organization, access and delivery, maintenance, and evaluation. The function of **promoting reading and the appreciation of literature** is a natural complement to the collection management role. Similarly, assisting users with **locating and using information sources** is fundamental to traditional librarianship and fits nicely with collection and literature responsibilities.

Patterns and Trends

In an examination of change in these fundamental roles over time, a number of discernable patterns emerge. First, in all three areas, a steady increase in the level of involvement and expansion of functions has occurred. Responsibilities do not seem to diminish in some areas while those in others increase; instead, there is a continual widening of scope in collections, promotion of literature, and reference services.

In some cases, the change is more than an extension of traditional roles. For example, library and information skills instruction goes well beyond the original function of reference and information service and can stand alone as a major functional area. This **teaching role** of the library media specialist is the most dramatic and far-reaching extension of a traditional function.

A second recognizable pattern is the change from passive to active participation in the carrying out of these functions. In the development process, the passive approach means having materials and services available for use by students and faculty, but leaving initiation of contact up to the patron. At some point, in each responsibility area, this passive attitude is replaced by an active, more aggressive stance. There is an attempt to reach out to users, promote services and collections, and become more directly involved in the research process and the use of information. Craver (1986) documents this general movement from passive "keeper of materials" to active participant in the educational process. As with the pattern of expanding functions, the role of the library media specialist as

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teacher of information skills represents a vivid example of the movement from passive to active.

The third noticeable trend is a disparity in perceptions of the role of the library media specialists. Ely (1982) notes the gap between internal perceptions within the profession and the perceptions of others--particularly administrators and teachers. He points to the Conant study (1980) finding that, "There is no commonly understood or accepted concept among educators as to what a media center is or should be, and therefore no firmly established expectations of media center personnel." Media specialists have long decried the lack of understanding and proper use of library media services by teachers and administrators.

A similar gap exists between the viewpoints expressed in the professional literature and actual practice. Hortin (1985) reported that while in theory the duties of today's school media specialist place greater emphasis on involvement in curriculum development, instructional design, and production, few professionals actually do much in the way of instructional development. Craver (1986) notes that although clear and substantive progress in the development of the instructional role of the media specialist is reflected in the literature and standards, research studies point to a delay in the implementation of these developments.

Beyond Traditional Roles

The trends noted above, particularly the expansion of scope and movement from passive to active participation, can be observed in each of the three major areas. For example, the collection role now encompasses the promotion of collection use beyond the walls of the library media center. This expanded role includes consultation with teachers on resources for instruction and a range of awareness and promotion activities, including booktalks, bibliographies and resource lists, and presentations to classes. The collections management function has also grown to include a wide range of materials, print and nonprint, in a unified media center concept.

The movement from a "collection caretaker" perspective to a "provider of appropriate materials" has influenced the reading guidance function as well. Beyond offering a quality collection of fiction and non-fiction, the library media specialist is now involved in the aggressive promotion of reading, literature, and literacy. This expanded role often involves library media specialists directly in teaching situations. Curriculum guides (e.g., *New York State Elementary Library Media Skills Curriculum*, 1980) discuss close cooperation and coordination with the language arts program to provide an integrated approach. In many cases, the library media specialist is engaged in a range of coordinated activities (e.g., booktalks, "Parents as Reading Partners") that seek to involve teachers and parents in literature and reading promotion. In other situations, however, literature and reading guidance activities are still carried out in isolation.

The trends of expansion of scope and passive becoming active involvement are easily seen in the reference and information service areas as well. Approach and attitude have moved well beyond simply providing reference materials and responding to questions when asked. Library media specialists seek to anticipate students' needs and situations where information service will be required. Concerns have grown beyond "access to materials" to encompass information use, manipulation, and evaluation within the overall research process.

As noted previously, this expansion of roles is most clearly seen in the development of library skills instruction programs. Today, the direct teaching of library and information skills to students is an important component of active reference and information services. In this capacity, the library media specialist is a teacher with an established curricular agenda, teaching objectives, and planned lessons.

It has been widely argued that an effective skills program is best accomplished in conjunction with classroom instruction (see Walker and Montgomery, 1983). Library and information skills are best taught when integrated and combined with subject objectives and content. Unfortunately, in too many situations the library skills program has been implemented as an isolated, separate subject. Therefore, a major theme in current literature and professional meetings is the movement from an independent approach and tightly scheduled classes to a more open approach integrated with classroom instruction.

The augmentation of the reference role to include direct teaching has visibly affected the ways in which media specialists spend time. Direct instructional responsibilities require more training and background in teaching, methodology, and curriculum. Certification requirements, library school programs, and the literature all reflect these additional skills.

In addition to the expansion of teaching library media skills, both the reference and collections management functions have expanded into a more global **curriculum consultant role**. Beyond simply providing materials, library media specialists are increasingly involved with the questions of how materials are used, by whom, and for what purpose. In addition to knowing materials, library media specialists must be aware of curriculum, teaching methods, design considerations, and evaluation. Media specialists' competencies related to instructional design both parallel and overlap the curriculum support role. Ely (Gerlach and Ely 1980, Chisholm and Ely 1976, 1979) has written extensively on the instructional design role and the need for media professionals to be involved with teaching-learning strategies, instructional media, and recommendations about the most appropriate media to attain stated objectives. This work requires familiarity with and competence in a wide range of learning technologies.

To date, the activities associated with curriculum support and instructional design have not been fully realized, exemplifying the gap between literature and practice noted above. Yes, there are media specialists acting in important curriculum and instructional design capacities; however, overall the field lags behind theory. In examining the major trends of each decade, Craver (1986) points out a clear, substantive expansion in the instructional role of the media specialist from "study hall monitor to curriculum designer." While this description is apt to some degree, much more remains to be done.

Responsibilities associated with computer technology provide a final example of the trends noted above. Here again, trends include: (1) a building on traditional functions, (2) a movement from passive to active participation, and (3) discernable gaps between internal and external perceptions. At the most fundamental level, the media specialist is responsible for materials provision, i.e., providing users with access to machines and software. All the traditional skills of selection and evaluation, collection management and promotion, come into play. Secondly, there is the promotion of literacy--in this case technological, computer literacy. Thirdly, the availability of reference sources and information via computer (online information utilities, microcomputer-based databases, compact disc, etc.) require library media specialists to use these materials and to instruct students in the use of computer-based information sources.

The level of computer-related involvement by library media specialists varies considerably across programs. Some have moved extensively into online search services; others have assumed full computer coordination and/or teaching responsibilities. Still others are fighting for initial access to a microcomputer. Based on the trends noted above, it seems reasonable to expect steady progress and involvement in the computer area. (For more on media specialists and computers see Cook and Truett, 1984; Woolls and Loertscher, 1986; and Costa and Costa, 2nd edition, 1986).

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To Conclude: The Future

The centrality and importance of modern school library media specialists in education seem clear. Contributing factors are: (1) the increasing use of technology in education (computers, video, telecommunications); (2) the "information explosion"--moving away from single-source, textbook-based education to more information-based education; (3) the emphasis on preparation for lifetime learning reflected in current reports on education (e.g., *A Nation at Risk*, 1983); and (4) and the acceptance by many media specialists of new responsibilities and roles, including teaching and the use of new technologies when appropriate.

A definable role, based on traditional functions but responsive to a changing world, is emerging. This role includes (1) collection management based on a unified media concept; (2) promotion of literacy and guidance in the use of media; (3) teaching information skills for an information society (through integration with classroom curriculum); (4) acting as a catalyst or change agent in the schools through awareness of "cutting edge" technology and consultation on curriculum and instructional design; and (5) assuming information management responsibilities beyond the walls of the centralized library media facility.

This role may be best summarized as a "mediation function," as described by Liesener (1984). The library media professional is the intermediary between the increasingly complex and rapidly expanding world of information and the client. Similarly, the Council on Library and Network Development of the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction has taken the position that "the search to solutions to educational problems must include library media specialists as information specialists in this information era" (Diehl et al., 1984).

Considerable variety and flexibility exist within this vision. Ely (1982) notes that today there is no single composite model of a school media specialist. Each media specialist creates his or her own role within a broad range of possibilities. While this may be frustrating to some degree, it is also the natural response to a changing environment. The trends of expansion, further development, and passive to active involvement will naturally continue. The primary challenge is to narrow the gaps between theory and practice, and between internal and external perceptions and expectations. Library media specialists increasingly are assuming the role described above. The users of library media service--students, teachers, administrators, and parents--must come to value, expect, and if necessary, demand high-quality library media programs.

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